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Social Work in Malaysia: The History and Development

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Abstract

This paper gives an overview of the history of social work pre and post-colonization of Malaysia by the western. This paper highlights issues of social work which bring social work education to Malaysia. The issues and difficulties raised in this paper provide insights to implement further input to develop and improvise social work education programs in Malaysia. All of the relevant stakeholding bodies within the social work profession and the allied educational sectors need to demonstrate their commitment to the advancement of social work in Malaysia in order to steer social work and social work education in Malaysia in the right direction for the future. Both social work education and social work practise should embody a genuine and suitably tight-knit approach to the community that is suitable for Malaysian culture and its contemporary conditions.

Keywords: Social Work Education, Education, Community Work, Community Development, Social Problem, Social Work

Introduction

Social work is a career choice and academic discipline that promotes social change, transformation, social cohesion, empowerment, human liberation, social equality, human rights, collective responsibility, and cultural sensitivity, which engages people to address difficult circumstances and enhance wellbeing. Social workers are trained to work in a variety of settings, including hospitals, schools, and community organizations (International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), 2014). Papouli (2014) also highlighted that social work is a practice profession that requires a student to gain theoretical and fieldwork skills in order to obtain values, skills, and knowledge in the conduct of the social work profession. Social work education originated from the social services profession. It was first founded in Western countries which aim to compensate for ineffective government responses to growing social problems, benevolent societies, and self-help organizations. It addressed the consequences of urbanization, poverty, and immigration.

The Origin in Western Countries

The history of social work practice begins in the Western world in the 17th century, primarily in the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK). The social work profession was developed to meet the needs of the ethno cultural communities of the western industrialized society. Due to the complexities associated with the social change that occurred during the industrialization and urbanization period affect traditional patterns of family and community support systems in the western world. The first was individual casework, a practice pioneered in the mid-19th century by the Charity Organization Society. The second was social administration, which comprised a variety of programs to alleviate poverty. Statewide poverty assistance can be traced back to the 17th-century English Poor Laws but was first institutionalized through the work of the Charity Organization Society. The third category was social action; rather than focusing on essential requirements, the emphasis was on political activity that worked through the community and group to transform their social realities and thereby alleviate poverty (Lymbery, 2005).

Professional social work began in 19th century England, as a result of the Industrial Revolution's social and economic catastrophes, particularly the societal conflict to address the resulting widespread urban poverty and its associated difficulties. Due to the fact that early social work was primarily focused on poverty, it was inextricably related to the concept of charity work (Gatenio Gabel & Mapp, 2020).

Around the same time frame, founded in 1843 and 1853 respectively, two such organizations were the Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor and the Children's Aid Society. They focused on addressing social issues such as child welfare and tenement housing. Major social welfare efforts such as the United States Sanitary Commission and the American Red Cross evolved in response to the circumstance generated by the turmoil of the Civil War (1861-1865). Began in 1865, Freedmen's Bureau was developed as a means to help newly emancipated slaves, however, it was shut down in 1872.

In 1889, Hull House, the community's most famous settle house, offered public education programs as well as social services such as a public kitchen, access to public baths, and a nursery. In the late 19th century, full programs dedicated to social work education began to take shape. Columbia University, for example, collaborated with The New York College of Science to create and deliver the first social work course. Later in 1904, Simmons College in Boston established the Boston School for Social Workers in collaboration with Harvard University. By 1908, the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, which is today known as the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, offered a comprehensive social work curriculum.

Social work never exists in Malaysia (Tanah Melayu). Social work ideology in Malaysia started when it was known as Malaya which was colonized by the Portuguese, Dutch, British, and Japan. During the British Development of social work education in Malaysia (first landed in Penang in 1786 through the East India Company) rule, social welfare targeted the immigrants from China and India. This ideology is an accurate portrayal of Western philosophy in every respect. Even though Malaysia has been colonized in the past by multiple colonial and foreign powers, including the Portuguese in early 1511, the Dutch in 1641, the English in 1824, and the Japanese from 1941-1945 (Hatta & Saad, 2014; Shaw & Ow, 2019), huge contribution of social work is from the British. Indeed, historical knowledge plays an important role in the

establishment of social work identity. Social work research generates and contributes to knowledge about social work and human services by elucidating the nature of service users' life experiences, elaborating the ways in which inequality and diversity affect those experiences, and advocating for social justice and inclusion (Shaw, 2006).

In conformity with Malaysian past history, British Colonial Administration transmits the novel ideology of social welfare and social work to Malaysia as early as the 1930s even though their main target was only the immigrants from China and India (Fahrudin 2016; Yasas, 1974). Malaysia is a Southeast Asia country consisting of thirteen states and three federal territories, separated by the South China Sea into two regions, Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo's East Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur is the national capital, the largest city, and the seat of the legislative branch of the federal government. The nearby planned capital of Putrajaya is the administrative capital, which represents the seat of both the executive branch (Cabinet, federal ministries, and agencies) and the judicial branch of the federal government. The country is dominated by ethnic Malay, and Chinese, with Indians forming a tinier section, with an estimated population of 32.7 million in 2021. The country is multiethnic and multicultural, which about half the population being ethnically Malay, with minorities of Chinese, Indians, and indigenous peoples. Malay is the official language but English is widely spoken in most parts of the country.

When the British returned to Malaya after World War II and resumed control under the British Military Administration (BMA), the country was in disarray: high unemployment, malnutrition, child hawkers, war victims, comfort women, and a smallpox epidemic were among the issues plaguing the Malayan population, especially in urban areas. The BMA established a relief department in order to address the issues that were already there; nonetheless, its offices almost immediately became welfare offices. The lack of resources also hampered remedial work, and as a result, the British Medical Association was unable to develop methods of instruction that were both more effective and more innovative. Ex-members of the Red Cross and missionaries ran training programs for the local women, during which they introduced the women to Western education and ways of doing things. These programs proved to be successful in addressing issues pertaining to the welfare of local children and women, as well as prostitution (Ashray, 2018). J.A. Harvey was given the responsibility of leading the first Welfare Department on June 10, 1946, by the Malayan Governor of Malaya, with the assistance of Captain Mohamed Salleh. A specific mission of the department was to alleviate poverty and starvation while also providing assistance to victims of conflict. The bulk of those working in welfare has received their training in juvenile, industrial, and rural welfare from the London School of Economics (Shaffie, 2006; Zaharrudin & Zakaria, 2021).

When the BMA transitioned from military to civil administration, a significant number of charity organizations were led by women. The patronage of Lady Mountbatten was extended to the Welfare Council of Malaya, which was an organization that promoted participation in voluntary activities. The Malayan Women's Service League was supported by Lady Gent, and the majority of its members were Malay women who were committed to philanthropic endeavors including nutritional programs and community service. In Malaya, the associations that promoted the well-being of women also included members of other races who played important positions in the organizations. For instance, the Ipoh Women's Association and the

New Democratic Youth League of Penang worked together to convince Chinese housewives to avoid purchasing products from the illegal market and looked out for the welfare of prostitutes (Hatta & Saad, 2014; Hatta et al., 2014).

According to the documentation of the past, social welfare work in Peninsular Malaya, which is now called Malaysia, got its start in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Local Malay people benefited from the majority of the initiatives, despite the fact that most of them were designed with the intention of boosting British enterprises and the British economy. Despite the fact that they served the interests of the colonizers, those programs were crucial in laying the groundwork for the present welfare programs in Malaysia. Government agencies and departments that play an important role in social development, it has been placed under several ministries (Table 1)

Table 1

Government agencies and departments in social development

Department	Year
Department of Social Welfare Malaya (<i>Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat Malaya</i>)	1946 - 1951
Department of Industry and Social Relation (<i>Kementerian Perusahaan dan Perhubungan Sosial</i>)	1952 - 1955
Department of Health and Social Welfare (<i>Kementerian Kesihatan dan Kebajikan Masyarakat</i>)	1956 - 1957
Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (<i>Kementerian Buruh dan Kebajikan Masyarakat</i>)	1958 - 1959
Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (<i>Kementerian Kesihatan dan Kebajikan Masyarakat</i>)	1960 - 1962
Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (<i>Kementerian Buruh dan Kebajikan Masyarakat</i>)	1963 - 1962
Ministry of General Welfare (<i>Kementerian Kebajikan Am</i>)	1964 - 1982
Ministry of Social Welfare Malaysia (<i>Kementerian Kebajikan Masyarakat Malaysia</i>)	1982 - 1990
Ministry of National Unity and Social Development (<i>Perpaduan Negara Malaysia</i>)	1990 - 2004
Ministry of Women, Family and Social Development (<i>Kementerian Pembangunan Wanita, Keluarga dan Masyarakat</i>)	2004 - current

Issues of Social Work Education in Malaysia

Governance

According to Turner (2017), multiple attempts have been made to bring the profession closer in alignment with the global benchmark through social work education and training in order to raise the standard of the profession. To ensure quality, social work education program must meet the standards set by the professional body in the field of social work provided by the legislative authority of the government. The absence of a professional organization given the legal provisions to regulate the development of social work education in Malaysia (George & Krishnakumar, 2014). Currently, the Malaysian Social Work Education program is accredited by the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA). On a further note, social work in Malaysia lacks its own identity as the majority of them are significantly affected by western culture while Malaysia is a multiracial and multi-faith country that is progressively complex in nature. In line with Shaffie's (2006) finding has illustrated the models in which welfare ideas and practices of the UK were diffused. In order to make social work and social work education initiatives at the educational level more effective and influential, it is essential for government entities to develop specialized policies and modules that are more suitable to be implemented in Malaysia. The transfer of welfare knowledge, concepts, and practices can be accomplished by changing and adapting them to the local settings, requirements, and culture (Shaffie, Teoh & Baba, 2020). As a result of Malaysia's multi-ethnic society, it has been suggested that the establishment and implementation of social welfare services have been hampered, as the government must consider the implications of the services for each ethnic group, which may include the provision of social work education in the country (Shaffie et al., 2020). Previously, the colonial jurisdiction had taken the initiative to train representatives from each of the major ethnic groups in the country. The government anticipated that by doing so, these applicants would be able to learn about welfare policies in the United Kingdom and adapt them to their home country of Malaysia (Shaffie et al., 2020). The government must take decisive action to ensure that the implementation of social work education is in line with globalization and local trends. According to Parker et al (2016), in addition to providing professional services, the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) got to have a legal obligation to carry out government policy on issues relevant to social welfare.

Malaysia lacks an accreditation organization that examines professional problems such as accreditation, norms, quality, and requirements. It is generally accepted that a social worker who obtained their education in the field of social work from a recognized educational institution can be considered trained for a career in the social work field. Nonetheless, whether they consider themselves professionals or not is debatable. There are some qualified social workers who do not have access to agency-based supervision and professional assistance or do not have their identity as "professional" social workers approved.

Professionalism

In this regard, there is no exception for social work in Malaysia. Although several authors have discussed the evolution of social work and social work education in Malaysia (Abdullah, 2003; Baba, 2011; Shaffie & Baba, 2013; Sinnasamy, 2006), few studies have explored the professionalization process from a legal point of view. In 2010, the Malaysian government approved six measures to improve the social work profession, including the establishment of National Social Work Competency Standards, the movement of the Social Workers Bill, the establishment of a national social work regulatory body, the recruitment of qualified social

workers, the standardization of social work education, and the development of social work courses at the certificate and diploma level (The Star, 2010).

The Task Force or Technical Committee on the enhancement of the practice of social work started the drafting of the Social Workers Bill in 2010. In the process, to solicit input from social workers, social welfare officers, and welfare organizations, numerous seminars, workshops, and roadshows were held across the country. Among the attributes of the proposed legislation are the following

(i) Establish a regulatory body in the name of Malaysian Social Work Council that undertakes the tasks of registration, licensing, complaints and discipline, continuing professional education and professional development of social workers in the country. Various committees will be set up for these tasks.

(ii) The council members will be made up of a number of social workers eligible to be registered, the Director General of Social Welfare, the President of the Malaysian Association of Social Workers, and lay persons representing the public. All council members will be appointed by the Minister responsible for social welfare in the country.

(iii) The proposed bill will set social work qualification at tertiary education (BSW or equivalent). Practitioner who wants to be recognized and carry the title Social Worker (SW) is required to register with the Council. However, considering that many social work practitioners in the country may not have tertiary social work qualification, they can be registered as Associate Social Worker (ASW) if they have enough practice experience. The Task Force has decided that the legislation to be as inclusive as possible rather than being exclusive.

(iv) The nature of regulation is mandatory registration but a grandparenting or sunset period has been proposed where the Council can review after the end of a stipulated period. The sunset period is meant for non qualification practitioners to be registered as ASW and to undergo accredited social work training in order to be either upgraded to SW or maintained as ASW after the sunset period.

(v) All practicing SW or ASW has to obtain a practice license or certificate which has to be renewed after a few years (the length of the license renewal will be determined by the Council). The criteria for renewal with Continuing Professional Education (CPE) points which means that all SW and ASW have to accumulate required CPE points by attending accredited CPE training programs from time to time.

(vi) Since the Malaysian Qualifying Agency (MQA) accredits all programs at the institutions of higher learning, the Council will provide guidelines on tertiary social work education to MQA and prepare a list of recognized social work qualifications that are eligible to register with the Council.

Figure 1: Malaysian Social Workers Bill (Source: International Federation of Social Workers)

How to distinguish between 'professional social workers' (those with a social work degree) and 'functional alternative social workers' (those without relevant qualifications but are employed to deliver social work service) in terms of their titles is the first question pertaining

to social worker registration in Malaysia (Hatta et al., 2014; Jafar et al., 2018). On the other hand, another difficulty that faces the entire social work profession in Malaysia is proving that professional social workers are more competent than functional alternative social workers. This is a challenge that has been brought up repeatedly in recent years. In Malaysia, social work education is inextricably linked to the numerous welfare programs and activities carried out by the government, non-profit organizations, and commercial entities (Amin et al., 2019). There are multiple ministries that were directly related to the social work profession and services, including the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, and Ministry of Higher Education. Almost every government and non-governmental organization that provides services to the public in this country provides social work services, which indirectly produces employment prospects for social workers. Protection for vulnerable children and young people, treatment and rehabilitation for offenders, ex-offenders, and drug addicts, as well as assistance for the elderly and the disabled, are among the advantages and facilities provided by the organization. As a result, how can social work education be recognized and how can it attract people to get to know social work education and gain knowledge about it effectively at the education level if it is not conducted in an appropriately professional manner?

Recognition

According to Amin et al (2020), social workers without a formal education in social work are common. He claimed that the vast majority of practitioners selected by Malaysia's Social Welfare Department lacked formal social work qualifications and were inadequately trained in their fields of practice. As a result, inefficiency will be the inevitable outcome of this circumstance. Abbot (1988) proposed that a profession must have a knowledge system that is appropriate for the work at hand, as well as a body that controls the practice of the profession. When addressing the current state of the social work profession in Malaysia, the path may be described as ambiguous, given there is no official regulation regulating the practice or those who provide it.

To maintain a high standard of quality, social work education programs must adhere to the requirements established by the government's legislative authority in the field of social work. The lack of a professional organization in Malaysia, despite the existence of legal regulations to control the development of social work education in the country (George & Krishnakumar, 2014). The Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) currently recognizes the Malaysian Social Work Education Program. As a result, Malaysia's social work curriculum lacks its own identity, as the majority of them are strongly influenced by western culture, despite the fact that Malaysia is a multiracial and multifaith country with an increasingly complicated natural setting. Thus, Malaysian social work educators must have an understanding of local culture and adapt their curriculum design (Ring, 2014).

The National Joint Consultative Committee for Social Work Education (NJCCSWE) was established in 2002 with the objective of enhancing the standards, competencies, and direction of social work education in Malaysia (Azman & Abbas, 2012). They highlighted the significance of designing social work courses that encompass curriculum, teaching, and learning approaches that effectively educate students for general competency and professionalism. Practicums should be conducted and supervised appropriately, in compliance with the current social work principles and practices. Although the importance of

standardizing the social work curriculum has been repeatedly emphasized, Malaysia only adheres to the minimal and general requirements set forth by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), the Code of Practice for Programme Accreditation (COPPA), and the disciplinary Program Standards with which academic programs must comply. Therefore, drawing attention to the recognition that social work education has received in Malaysia, can help strengthen social work education that is included in the national education curriculum, and this can indirectly encourage this course to be created in public and other private universities.

Conclusion

The establishment of social work as a field of study within Malaysia's educational institutions has occurred in a systematic way over time. However, in comparison to other developed countries, it is still a long way from reaching its potential. There are a number of issues that have been discovered, but only three of those problems have been brought to the forefront: governance, professionalism, and recognition. Since the British introduced the idea of social welfare during their colonial in Tanah Melayu (Malaysia), these three challenges have been increasingly significant.

It is essential for Malaysia to investigate a variety of approaches and then devise one that satisfies the requirements and goals of local professionals without watering down the fundamental social work concepts, virtues, and integrity. In order to effectively solve the difficulties associated with the social workers and social work education, Malaysia has to have an accurate understanding of both its strengths and limitations. However, the professionalization and protection of the title of a registered social worker will only be meaningful to marginalized individuals and vulnerable groups if the profession eventually demonstrates the ability and competence to safeguard, provide higher-quality services, and bring about positive life changes for the underprivileged.

There are currently only six public universities in Malaysia that offer formal education in social work. These universities are Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), and Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UNISZA) is the newest of these universities. While Universiti Malaya (UM) is known for its skill in social administration, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) is known for its strength in human development; nonetheless, it does not offer a comprehensive education in social work. Even though this program has been implemented at a number of different universities, there is still a dearth of both general and specialized postgraduate programs at the higher levels. The employment of qualified social workers is still not guaranteed within the social service sector, and the field of social work has not yet achieved its full potential as a profession or established itself as a viable career option. In the years to come, the professionalization project that is currently in the planning stages may provide the foundation for social work educators to play a leading role in research, the design and delivery of training courses, the evaluation of competency standards, and the overall consolidation of the profession. To drive social work education in Malaysia on the right path for the future, all of the relevant stakeholding bodies within the social work profession and the allied educational sectors need to demonstrate their commitment to the advancement of social work in Malaysia. It is necessary for the National Joint Consultative Committee on Social Work Education to play an important role in the

process of exchanging information and constructing social work curriculum while ensuring that quality is maintained. Both social work education and social work practice should embody a genuine and adequately tight-knit approach to the community that is acceptable for Malaysian society and its present settings.

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